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School for THE FUTURE

the UNESCO Courier

Contents

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A "lesson" in Baicao River, Sichuan (China)

SCHOOL FOR THE FUTURE

Education for sustainable development… Launched in 2005, the concept is still in its early stages, but it is making progress. What it means is education designed to build our capacities for facing today's major challenges – preserving the environment, respecting biodiversity, safeguarding human rights – and focused on the future.

EDITORIAL P3

WATER SCHOOLS SHED LIGHT ON YANGTZE POLLUTION

The Yangtze river system produces 40 percent of China's grain, a third of its cotton, 48 percent of its freshwater fish and 40 percent of the country's total industrial output. It is also, alas, a depository for 60 percent of the country's pollution. A plan to save the river was launched by schoolchildren in Sichuan province and has taken on national scope. P 8

SCHOOL FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Still a fledgling concept, Education for Sustainable Development is nonetheless making headway in Jordan. Raising awareness among young people about the importance of good water management is a crucial issue for Queen Rania Al-Abdullah of Jordan, UNESCO goodwill ambassador and chair of the Arab Sustainability Leadership Group. P 4

INSIDE THE GREEN TENTS

Despite Bolivia's extraordinary biodiversity, it has one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world. Meanwhile, massive migration towards the fertile lowlands is hampering sustainable development. Conservation International is using games to raise public awareness. P 10

SAVING STARFISH

A dozen facilitators, a pile of copies of an educational newspaper, a bus…sometimes it doesn't take much to make thousands of schoolchildren more aware of sustainable development. In Kenya, the organizers of the "Chanuka Express" programme are inspiring underprivileged young people to become agents for change. Their motto: "Our life, our world". P 6

ALPHABET OF DEVELOPMENT

Literacy is at the heart of our societies, says Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, who was named UNESCO's Special Envoy on Literacy for Development last March. For more than 20 years, she has been fighting illiteracy in her homeland where the problem has been neglected. P 12

FOCUS

"And Then They Came For Me": Last words of Prize laureate Lasantha Wickrematunge

The 2009 UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize is being awarded to the late Sri Lankan journalist and editor of the *Sunday Leader*. P 13

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The puzzle shows the harmful effects of pollution. "Green Tents" project, Bolivia.

TOWARDS BUILDING MORE JUST AND SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES.

What is Education for Sustainable Development? It is education that banks on the future. It is designed to enable us to face the major challenges of today: preserving the environment, respecting biodiversity, protecting human rights.

Just over two decades ago, the World Commission on Environment and Development made an appeal for a "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." In a nutshell, this captures the essence of sustainability – a long-term vision that speaks to our sense of responsibility for the present and future.

This vision underpins the eight Millennium Development Goals endorsed by the majority of the world's countries in 2000. They aim to alleviate extreme poverty and hunger, improve child and maternal health, combat HIV and AIDS, achieve universal primary education, and promote gender equality and environmental sustainability. Education is imperative for reaching these goals, a conviction that underlies the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) launched in 2005.

ESD sets new directions for learning. First, it requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the social, environmental, economic and cultural dimensions of development and generates awareness of our interdependence - with others, with the world around us, and with nature. It enables us to address such issues as environmental protection, biodiversity and human rights. Second, ESD imparts skills such as critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving. In this regard, teachers have an influential role to play in encouraging more dialogue, team work and initiative. Third and most fundamentally, ESD promotes values such as peace, equality and respect for others and for the wider natural and social environment. ESD is about empowering learners with the knowledge, skills and values to become real agents of change.

Rethinking education's goals

The recent UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development held in Bonn, Germany (31 March to 2 April) showed that many countries have designed innovative ESD policy frameworks. The Decade has encouraged countries to rethink the purposes of education, curriculum content and pedagogical practice in ways that are complementary to the drive to achieve Education for All.

The DESD is generating a myriad of initiatives and projects that are putting ESD into practice in schools and extra-curricular settings. But progress remains uneven and much more needs to be done to increase public awareness about ESD. Now we have to work together to ensure that ESD becomes a guiding principle for improving the relevance and quality of education, through appropriate engagement with policy-makers, teacher training institutions, universities and other key partners. Finally, we must take every opportunity to stress the centrality of education for sustainable development.

© Daniel Mas

Education for sustainable development highlights the social, environmental, economic and cultural aspects of development.

A response to the global crisis

The financial and economic crisis makes this injunction more timely than ever. We will not succeed in reducing poverty and building more inclusive, peaceful and sustainable societies without empowering individuals at all ages with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible and informed choices. Quality education that promotes awareness, openness, solidarity and responsibility must be part of any response to today's global crisis.

As this issue of the UNESCO Courier illustrates, much can be done when students, teachers, schools and communities mobilize to address social and environmental challenges. But leaders and policy-makers must create the conditions for education at all levels to be geared towards building more just and sustainable societies.

Nicholas Burnett,
Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO

Still a fledgling concept, Education for Sustainable Development is nonetheless making headway in Jordan. Raising awareness among young people about the importance of good water management is a crucial issue for Queen Rania Al-Abdullah of Jordan, UNESCO goodwill ambassador and chair of the Arab Sustainability Leadership Group.

SCHOOL FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Questions submitted by Cathy Nolan (UNESCO)

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Queen Rania Al-Abdullah of Jordan, during a visit to UNESCO in Paris.

What are the implications of ESD for the Arab region?

ESD is an imperative in Jordan, and across the whole Arab world, because although sustainability is more than a concept, it's not yet a culture. Raising awareness in schools, universities, the public sector, and private companies is crucial if we are to make the most of our precious resources, and provide opportunities for our youthful population.

The Arab world faces serious development challenges: 5.7 million of our children are not enrolled in school, almost three and a half million of them are girls; 8.9 million of our young people are illiterate; and only one in four young people has a job. We must put young people at the top of our local, regional, and global agendas.

60% of our region is under the age of 30, that's 70 million young people in the Arab world. They need our help in order to become all they can be. And that means that we need to create jobs, urgently. We need to be graduating young people with the skills and the tools they need to participate competitively in the global and regional job market. ESD is a key foundation block for us.

I am pleased that there have been some significant strides in this field. Last year, a group of dynamic business leaders established the Arab Sustainability Leadership Group, which I am proud to chair. Not only are members publishing sustainability reports and engaging civil society and business leaders, they are practicing their businesses in ways that support economic vitality, ecological integrity, and social equity. And that's a smart start; they are great role models, but there's still a long way for us to go.

© UNESCO/Mustafa R. Mohammed Daras

"I'm proud that we've achieved gender parity at all levels of education in Jordan," says Queen Rania

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What aspects of Education for Sustainable Development are particularly important to you and your country?

We recognize that all aspects of ESD are important for Jordan to prosper now and in the future. But given our water scarcity issues, water education and management are very important to us, as well as caring for, and making the most of, all our natural resources – our beautiful nature reserves, for example.

Additionally, ESD is important for us from a gender perspective. I'm proud that we've achieved gender parity at all levels of education in Jordan; in fact we have more girls at university than boys. But that doesn't translate into workforce figures yet. Traditional mindsets still result in girls getting married and having children early, not joining the labour market – although, I'm pleased to say that this is changing. ESD is important to teach children and parents how girls can play a crucial and productive role in Jordan's development.

Can you mention some specific projects?

To be honest, it's still a fledgling concept, but we're working very hard to increase awareness and visibility of ESD. For example, Jordan established a national ESD working group with members from government, universities, NGOs, and the private sector to promote ESD across all sectors; and ESD has been included in legislation to protect the environment.

The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN), with the Ministry of Education, has been integrating environmental concerns into the Jordanian curricula to ensure that environmental awareness is developed at an early stage. The RSCN organizes nature teams at schools, has founded over 1000 conservation clubs at local schools, and has prepared ESD manuals.

Several NGOs are active in providing non formal education and informal education opportunities for youth and women all over the country. These initiatives are conducted in places, and at times, to suit the rhythm of women who have to balance caring for their families with learning new skills.

We are also one of four countries in the Arab region (the others being Lebanon, Oman and Tunisia) with clear public budgets for ESD – proof of our commitment to creating lasting change.

Not many people know this, but Jordan is blessed with stunning nature reserves. They have enabled us to develop several award-winning sustainable tourism and eco-tourism projects, which help us both protect and promote the things that are most precious to us. Together with the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, and several other NGOs, we're working hard to strike a balance between developing these areas, and encouraging people to visit, which generates income for local communities.

Photo 3 : © Simon Chauvin

Nature reserve in Dana, Jordan.

A dozen facilitators, a pile of copies of an educational newspaper and a bus… sometimes it doesn't take much to make thousands of schoolchildren more aware of sustainable development. In Kenya, the organizers of the "Chanuka Express" programme are inspiring underprivileged young people to become agents for change. Their motto: "Our life, our world".

SAVING STARFISH

© Jacaranda Designs Ltd

A crowd runs to meet the Chanuka Express.

An older man was walking along the beach and came upon a sandy stretch where thousands of starfish had washed ashore.

Just ahead, he spotted a teenager picking up starfish one at a time and tossing them back into the ocean.

"Oh! You're being silly!" he exclaimed. "You can't possibly save all of these starfish. There are too many!"

Smiling the teenager replied, "I know. But I can save this one," and she tossed another into the ocean, "and this one", toss, "and this one, and…"

Each and every one of our acts is critical.

This is the message the Kenyan programme Chanuka Express has been spreading among young people–both in and out of school – for the last several years. Always do the "right thing" because we can make a difference! And young people CAN … and ARE doing just that.

In Kiswahili Chanuka means to "Get with it or 'bloom' by using knowledge." A partnership between UNESCO Jacaranda Designs–with help from the private sector including Tetra Pak and Shell–the programme has a budget of US$ 160,000 (10% of which is provided by the UNESCO office in Nairobi). Several Jacaranda Designs staff members and a dozen student volunteers run the mobile outreach training initiative out of a bus –the Chanuka Express. The slogan is Maisha Yetu, Dunia Yetu (Our Life, Our World) and the theme is "Learning for Sustainable Living."

Reaching teenagers in low-income primary schools and communities, the programme focuses on smaller groups of peer-selected Chanuka Club leaders who identify their own priority issues of personal safety, health, hygiene, water and sanitation, and environmental degradation. Club membership totals about 5000.

Like the young woman with the starfish, their level of determination is making an impact not only on them but on their communities, schools and families too. Sustainable development in our country is depending on them: on young people equipped with productive knowledge, practical skills and a positive character choosing to be 'agents of change.'

© Jacaranda Designs Ltd

The "safety" group with leader Dagmawit.

A day in the life of Chanuka

In the morning, Chanuka facilitators climb aboard the Chanuka Express bound for the day's venue. With them is a raft of teaching tools,

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What to do about climate change?

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props, and art supplies. Among these tools are copies of the Young African Express, a monthly educational newspaper published by Jacaranda Designs, aligned to the Kenyan curriculum and filled with illustrated articles, cartoons, facts and games focusing on essential life skills.

On arrival, they meet up with a preselected group of teenagers. Teachers and other members of the community are there too. After a short highly participatory puppet show or community theatre introduction, the youth form four Chanuka teams–Peace and Safety, Health, Water and Sanitation, and the Environment. In small groups, the young people engage in games, demonstrations, discovery sessions, role-plays and discussions to identify key local challenges and solutions. These young leaders form the backbone of the Chanuka Clubs set up in every school involved (60 out of 5000 secondary schools in the country and 150 out of 20,000 primary schools). The day ends with presentations of the identified key issues and the action plans made by each group.

The Chanuka Express visits each site 2–3 times a year. Between visits, the young people and teachers are not idle. They form Chanuka Clubs with Health, Water and Sanitation, Safety and Peace, and Environment teams. The teams recruit others in their schools, passing on the messages they created and mobilizing others to join in taking action on important issues. They record their plans, obstacles and successes in supplied notebooks, which are used by the Chanuka facilitators on return visits.

A 25-cent revolution

The results are impressive. Chanuka Club members at Evangel Primary School in Baba Dogo, Nairobi realised there was a high rate of absenteeism at their school, which was affecting the pupils' performance.

The club members investigated and found out that pupils were missing school due to stomach ache. They connected the stomach aches to worms caused by unhygienic habits including eating with unwashed hands and drinking unsafe water.

The club's solution was to start a de-worming campaign in the school by distributing information then holding discussions with their schoolmates to motivate action. To feel better, they needed to get rid of the worms by taking de-worming tablets. To buy these, they came up with a plan–they asked every member of their school community to donate Ksh 20 (25 cents US) to the project.

Their parents were so impressed by the idea that they contributed more money, and the club was soon able to buy de-worming tablets for the entire school community–children, teenagers and the adult teachers!

Step by step, through such activities, education for sustainable development becomes a reality.

Yvonne Otieno
and **Susan Scull-Carvalho,**
Jacaranda Designs

The Yangtze river system produces 40 percent of China's grain, a third of its cotton, 48 percent of its freshwater fish and 40 percent of the country's total industrial output. It is also, alas, a depository for 60 percent of the country's pollution. A plan to save the river was launched by schoolchildren in Sichuan province and has taken on national scope.

© Tang Ming

Primary school students conduct a survey among villagers in Piankou Town, Beichuan County, Sichuan Province.

WATER SCHOOLS SHED LIGHT ON YANGTZE POLLUTION

Foul-smelling "rubbish mountains" consisting of piles of polystyrene, cardboard cups, food scraps, plastic bags, medical needles and other debris pollute the Baicao River, which provides drinking water to the 6,600 inhabitants of Piankou Town, Beichuan County, in southwest China's Sichuan Province.

In the 1980s, this tributary of the Yangtze, China's biggest river, was "so clear that you could see to the bottom", recalls Zeng Wenjun, a town resident in his forties. "The Qingbo (Clean Water) Fish exclusive to the river was unmatchable in taste, but it is now regrettably extinct."

The run-off from private gold mines and sandstone collectors adds to the filth. The mushrooming small and medium-sized hydropower stations also pose an ecological risk to the livelihoods of the people living nearby.

The 1,000-plus towns along the upper reaches of the Yangtze pump the numerous tributaries with waste, causing a huge environmental problem at the Three Gorges Dam, says Fu Zhiping, a professor of ecology at Mianyang Normal University, Sichuan.

The Yangtze river system produces 40 percent of the nation's grain, a third of its cotton, 48 percent of its freshwater fish and 40 percent of the total industrial output. However, it is also a depository for 60 percent of the country's pollution, making it the single largest source of pollution in the Pacific Ocean, according to the Shangri-la Institute for Sustainable Communities (SISC), a Chinese non-governmental organization.

Fifty thousand schoolchildren to the Yangtze's rescue

In the spring of 2008, both professor Fu Zhiping and Sun Yao, primary school student in Piankou, took part in the Water School for a Liv-

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© Tang Ming

Primary school students conduct a survey among villagers in Piankou Town, Beichuan County, Sichuan Province.

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ing Yangtze under the International Water School Program sponsored by Austria's Swarovski company, a program that also includes the Nile in Egypt and India's Ganges.

The Chinese program, supervised by the SISC, with the Ministry of Education and UNESCO as its partners, has involved more than 50,000 students from 27 middle and primary schools in Sichuan and the adjacent provinces of Qinghai and Yunnan, as well as Shanghai, where the Yangtze meets the East China Sea.

Under the guidance of teacher Tang Ming, Sun and his classmates at Piankou Central Primary School began to monitor water quality by using graduated cylinders and test papers, which they had never used before.

The preliminary test result confirmed Sun's concerns: the PH index stands at 5.8 at the lower reaches of Baicao River, with the turbidity reaching Grade IV, showing that the water has already been polluted to an alarming extent.

Based on further investigations in and around Piankou Town, Sun and his classmates wrote a letter proposing that municipal authorities re-arrange the 15 dustbins along the two major streets "in a more scientific way" and establish a rubbish disposal system.

To their great surprise, the town government approved their proposal, and a sewage treatment plant based on the scientific principles of a biological wetland is also under discussion.

P© Jane Pennell

China has its share of polluting factories, such as this one on the Yangtze.

The students went on to disseminate questionnaires to the communities of Piankou, and 89 percent of the respondents believed it was necessary to treat the river pollution.

"The project provides a platform for effective environmental protection around the branches of Yangtze, and it is a model for shifting away from the exam-focused educational system," says Fu, who has 14 years' experience in the field of environmental education.

Tibetan lamas joining in

The water schools on the Yangtze have gone beyond the boundaries of campuses to complement local social, economic and cultural conditions.

For instance, the lamas of Dongzhulin Temple, in Deqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan, are invited to contribute to water protection through their religious teachings that link nature and man.

"We encourage the process of learning by doing, so that a change in mindsets and behavior will impact the policy-making of government, which promotes wider public participation in long-term environmental protection," says Dorjie, SISC program coordinator.

In 2009, the project will expand to China's capital Beijing, a city notorious for its scarcity of water. Besides the Education for Sustainable Development on the Tibet Plateau project surrounding the Yalu Tsangpo River, the SISC is also aiming to carry out a similar environmental education project along China's second longest river, the Yellow River, says Dorjie.

Gong Yidong,
journalist, *China Features*

Despite Bolivia's extraordinary biodiversity, it has one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world. Meanwhile, massive migration towards the fertile lowlands is hampering sustainable development. Conservation International is using games to raise public awareness.

© Trópico

"Don't shoot !", says the puppet.

INSIDE THE GREEN TENTS

Inside a green marquee, eight year-old Juan throws a dice in a game of snakes and ladders painted on a wooden board. He throws a four. He moves his counter forward and lands on a square marked "deforestation". He is penalized and told to "go back three squares". On his next turn he lands on a square showing a river basin. He is asked what can be done to preserve a water source. "Plant more trees!" he replies. He is rewarded, and can move forward five squares.

We are in the Amazonian village of Rurrenabaque, inside a military enclosure, not far from the Madidi conservation area. A crowd of children, most of them between 6 and 11 years old, jostles around the puppet shows, memory games and puzzles. The adults are more interested in the poster exhibits. That evening, there will be the first performance of a play written and performed by a group of young actors, inspired by suggestions made by the "Green Tent" teachers, travelling throughout this tropical area of Bolivia. All the activities have a common theme - pollution and protection of the environment.

The green canvas awning stretched over four plastic poles looks like a giant beer tent at a summer festival. Or a travelling circus, with fun activities based on environmental issues, rather than performing animals.

Home-made games

The travelling show uses interactive teaching methods designed for learning about sustainable development, in an attempt to make up for the absence of environmental issues in the Bolivian school curriculum. The approach works well in this country, steeped in oral culture. Since the project first started in 2000, the twenty Green Tents have toured some 100 indigenous communities. They travel from village to village, at the request of local people, staying for four to five days at a time.

Set up and administered by the international environmental organization Conservation International, together with the Bolivian conservation association Trópico, the Green Tents project is run by a group of about fifteen agronomists, biologists, foresters, teachers and communicators, most of them volunteers. The project's US$ 30,000 annual budget comes from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Bolivian National Service for Protected Parks (SERNAP).

Eduardo Forno, Director of Conservation International's Bolivia office and initiator of the Green Tents, is keen to point out that "the teaching materials are not dreamed up in offices in faraway cities, but by pupils, teachers and foresters from the region. They are the ones who

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decide which myths, stories and pictures they will use. Descriptions of the games are then sent into town, where they are manufactured by carpenters and artists, and dispatched to the schools. Specialists are on hand to make sure the content is accurate."

Green tents for a green country

The Madidi Park conservation area lies in a corridor linking the Cordillera de Vilcabamba mountain range in Peru to the Amboró National Park, near Santa Cruz (Bolivia). This corridor is thought to harbour the richest biodiversity in South America. But thousands of people are coming to live here, fleeing the fragmentation and arid conditions of the high plateaux of the Andes and looking for other ways to survive. This continual influx is causing considerable environmental damage - every year, some 300,000 hectares of forest are destroyed in Bolivia, according to the Environment Ministry.

"Bolivia is landlocked, so the economy is turned towards the tropical interior, rather than the coast," explains Eduardo Forno. "This is the major conservation challenge here. The people of the fertile lowlands know and respect the extraordinary biodiversity of their region, which is not necessarily the case for those from the high plateaux. This is why we are mainly targeting this group, as well as young people. There is a preconception that the new generation must be impregnated with the indigenous culture, as if it were passed down through their genes. But we tend to forget that the transmission of culture can be affected by market forces and modern living."

The intense internal migration and Bolivia's opening to international markets for timber, soya and the mining industry are changing and increasing the risks to the environment. "People can see that there are fewer and fewer fish, but don't perceive mining as a threat to the environment," says Eduardo Forno. "But we know that any form of pollution higher up the valley is eventually going to spread downwards and that mercury pollution sooner or later kills off the fish. The Green Tents project is raising issues like this and encouraging people to think about the environment, beyond the immediate situation."

According to Eduardo Forno, environmental education is one of the few means to maintain the services provided by healthy ecosystems. "It is fundamental for the preservation of nature and to keep Bolivia green," he says.

Activities inside the Rurrenabaque Green Tent show clearly that education for sustainable development can be fun, no matter how serious the challenges for the future of humanity.

Niels Boel,
danish journalist

© Trópico

A green tent in the Rurrenabaque military enclosure, near Madidi park.

© Trópico

Group of children writing a play with an environmental theme.

ALPHABET OF DEVELOPMENT

Literacy is at the heart of our societies, says Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, who was named UNESCO's Special Envoy on Literacy for Development last March. For more than 20 years, she has been fighting illiteracy in her homeland where the problem has been neglected.

Excerpts from an interview given to EduInfo (UNESCO Education Sector)

© Sebastiaan ter Burg

Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, UNESCO Special Envoy on Literacy for Development.

Let me first say that I am delighted to start working with UNESCO more formally in my new role. I intend to work closely with all experts, adding value where I can to the framework of action provided by the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012). This framework proposes a new vision of literacy, by situating Literacy for All at the heart of Education for All and by promoting it as a key for development and essential for the health and well-being of people everywhere. I will advocate these important messages, with the aim of helping to make a difference and create new dynamics.

Literacy is about people, and thus literacy lies at the heart of society. I want to appeal to everyone to join forces for the benefit of development of both people and societies. To tackle this complex issue structurally, we will also have to think outside of the box at times when it comes to solutions and involving stakeholders, from governments to business, from municipalities to educational experts and illiterates themselves. It's only by joining forces that we can make a real impact. It will therefore come as no surprise that I will focus on reaching out to those not yet fully aware or committed, rather than on preaching to the converted.

Literacy is a vital means of human development. It is an enabling skill for further learning opportunities in the framework of lifelong learning. It leads to empowerment, social inclusion, health and better life chances. Everyone deserves to have those chances. So we need to urgently mobilise our entire societies to tackle illiteracy structurally, also by linking prevention and reduction. I would like to convince the key actors of the enormous potential of literacy and also show them the actual costs of illiteracy for our societies. And all this against the backdrop that we have no time to waste.

THE LITERACY MARKET

© GPD

Princess Laurentien in the field.

Honorary president of the Dutch Association of Public Libraries, Princess Laurentien also lends her support to the Dutch Language Society and the Listening and Braille Library of the Netherlands. In 2004, she founded the Reading & Writing Foundation (Stichting Lezen & Schrijven) to raise awareness and develop pilot projects to get more actors involved in the fight against illiteracy.

"We work on the principle of a snowball effect to reach out and involve business, social and government partners who can make a key contribution to this area," she has said. The foundation encourages a diverse range of formal and non-formal educational initiatives, and forms partnerships with all kinds of organizations in society, from trade unions to prisons to child healthcare centres: "We choose promising and innovative projects tackling low literacy aimed at young people and adults, but also mobilizing the business community, parents and educational organizations. We have built our approach around the literacy 'marketplace' creating and matching supply and demand."

“And Then They Came For Me”:

Last words of UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize laureate

Lasantha Wickrematunge

© Upali Newspapers Ltd

Sri Lankan journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge won the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize 2009 posthumously.

The 2009 UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize is being awarded to the late Sri Lankan journalist and editor of the Sunday Leader, Lasantha Wickrematunge, who was assassinated on 8 January this year. The article reproduced here expresses Mr Wickrematunge’s commitment and fierce independence. Written for posthumous publication, this piece, first published in the Sunday Leader three days after his death, shows that Mr Wickrematunge was fully aware of the dangers facing him. It bears testimony to great courage, recognized by the jury of 14 professional journalists from all over the world that selected Lasantha Wickrematunge for the Prize.

No other profession calls on its practitioners to lay down their lives for their art save the armed forces and, in Sri Lanka, journalism. In the course of the past few years, the independent media have increasingly come under attack. Electronic and print-media institutions have been burnt, bombed, sealed and coerced. Countless journalists have been harassed, threatened and killed. It has been my honour to belong to all those categories and now especially the last.

I have been in the business of journalism a good long time. Indeed, 2009 will be The Sunday Leader’s 15th year. Many things have changed in Sri Lanka during that time, and it does not need me to tell you that the greater part of that change has been for the worse. We find ourselves in the midst of a civil war ruthlessly prosecuted by protagonists whose bloodlust knows no bounds. Terror, whether perpetrated by terrorists or the state, has become the order of the day. Indeed, murder has become the primary tool whereby the state seeks to control the organs of liberty. Today it is the journalists, tomorrow it will be the judges. For neither group have the risks ever been higher or the stakes lower.

Why then do we do it? I often wonder that. After all, I too am a husband, and the father of three wonderful children. I too have responsibilities and obligations that transcend my profession, be it the law or journalism. Is it worth the risk? Many people tell me it is not. Friends tell me to revert to the bar, and goodness knows it offers a better and safer livelihood. Others, including political leaders on both sides, have at various times sought to induce me to take to politics, going so far as to offer me ministries of my choice. Diplomats, recognising the risk journalists face in Sri Lanka, have offered me safe passage and the right of residence in their countries. Whatever else I may have been stuck for, I have not been stuck for choice.

But there is a calling that is yet above high office, fame, lucre and security. It is the call of conscience.

The Sunday Leader has been a controversial newspaper because we say it like we see it: whether it be a spade, a thief or a murderer, we call it by that name. We do not hide behind euphemism. The investigative articles we print are supported by documentary evidence thanks to the public-spiritedness of citizens who at great risk to themselves pass on this material to us. We have exposed scandal after scandal, and never once in these 15 years has anyone proved us wrong or successfully prosecuted us.

The free media serve as a mirror in

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Lasantha Wickrematunge

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which the public can see itself sans mascara and styling gel. From us you learn the state of your nation, and especially its management by the people you elected to give your children a better future. Sometimes the image you see in that mirror is not a pleasant one. But while you may grumble in the privacy of your armchair, the journalists who hold the mirror up to you do so publicly and at great risk to themselves. That is our calling, and we do not shirk it.

Every newspaper has its angle, and we do not hide the fact that we have ours. Our commitment is to see Sri Lanka as a transparent, secular, liberal democracy. Think about those words, for they each has profound meaning. Transparent because government must be openly accountable to the people and never abuse their trust. Secular because in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society such as ours, secularism offers the only common ground by which we might all be united. Liberal because we recognise that all human beings are created different, and we need to accept others for what they are and not what we would like them to be. And democratic... well, if you need me to explain why that is important, you'd best stop buying this paper.

The Sunday Leader has never sought safety by unquestioningly articulating the majority view. Let's face it, that is the way to sell newspapers. On the contrary, as our opinion pieces over the years amply demonstrate, we often voice ideas that many people find distasteful. For example, we have consistently espoused the view that while separatist terrorism must be eradicated, it is more important to address the root causes of terrorism, and urged government to view Sri Lanka's ethnic strife in the context of history and not through the telescope of terrorism. We have also agitated against state terrorism in the so-called war against terror, and made no secret of our horror that Sri Lanka is the only country in the world routinely to bomb its own citizens. For these views we have been labelled traitors, and if this be treachery, we wear that label proudly.

Many people suspect that The Sunday Leader has a political agenda: it does not. If we appear more critical of the government than of the opposition it is only because we believe that - pray excuse cricketing argot - there is no point in bowling to the fielding side. Remember that for the few years of our existence in which the UNP was in office, we proved to be the biggest thorn in its flesh, exposing excess and corruption wherever it occurred. Indeed, the steady stream of embarrassing exposés we published may well have served to precipitate the downfall of that government.

Neither should our distaste for the war be interpreted to mean that we support the Tigers. The LTTE are among the most ruthless and bloodthirsty organisations ever to have infested the planet. There is no gainsaying that it must be eradicated. But to do so by violating the rights of Tamil citizens, bombing and shooting them mercilessly, is not only wrong but shames the Sinhalese, whose claim to be custodians of the dhamma is forever called into question by this savagery, much of which is unknown to the public because of censorship.

What is more, a military occupation of the country's north and east will require the Tamil people of those regions to live eternally as second-class citizens, deprived of all self respect. Do not imagine that you can placate them by showering "development" and "reconstruction" on them in the post-war era. The wounds of war will scar them forever, and you will also have an even more bitter and hate-

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Lasantha Wickrematunge launched the Sunday Leader with his brother in 1994. He used it to support the campaign he led against the war between the Sri Lankan army and the Tamil rebels

© Reuters via Guardian

He was "a man who was clearly conscious of the dangers he faced but nevertheless chose to speak out, even beyond his grave," said Joe Thloloe, President of the jury of the 2009 UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize.

Lasantha Wickrematunge

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ful Diaspora to contend with. A problem amenable to a political solution will thus become a festering wound that will yield strife for all eternity. If I seem angry and frustrated, it is only because most of my countrymen - and all of the government - cannot see this writing so plainly on the wall.

It is well known that I was on two occasions brutally assaulted, while on another my house was sprayed with machine-gun fire. Despite the government's sanctimonious assurances, there was never a serious police inquiry into the perpetrators of these attacks, and the attackers were never apprehended. In all these cases, I have reason to believe the attacks were inspired by the government. When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me.

The irony in this is that, unknown to most of the public, Mahinda and I have been friends for more than a quarter century. Indeed, I suspect that I am one of the few people remaining who routinely addresses him by his first name and uses the familiar Sinhala address oya when talking to him. Although I do not attend the meetings he periodically holds for newspaper editors, hardly a month passes when we do not meet, privately or with a few close friends present, late at night at President's House. There we swap yarns, discuss politics and joke about the good old days. A few remarks to him would therefore be in order here.

Mahinda, when you finally fought your way to the SLFP presidential nomination in 2005, nowhere were you welcomed more warmly than in this column. Indeed, we broke with a decade of tradition by referring to you throughout by your first name. So well known were your commitments to human rights and liberal values that we ushered you in like a breath of fresh air. Then, through an act of folly, you got yourself involved in the Helping Hambantota scandal. It was after a lot of soul-searching that we broke the story, at the same time urging you to return the money. By the time you did so several weeks later, a great blow had been struck to your reputation. It is one you are still trying to live down.

You have told me yourself that you were not greedy for the presidency. You did not have to hanker after it: it fell into your lap. You have told me that your sons are your greatest joy, and that you love spending time with them, leaving your brothers to operate the machinery of state. Now, it is clear to all who will see that that machinery has operated so well that my sons and daughter do not themselves have a father.

In the wake of my death I know you will make all the usual sanctimonious noises and call upon the police to hold a swift and thorough inquiry. But like all the inquiries you have ordered in the past, nothing will come of this one, too. For truth be told, we both know who will be behind my death, but dare not call his name. Not just my life, but yours too, depends on it.

Sadly, for all the dreams you had for our country in your younger days, in just three years you have reduced it to rubble. In the name of patriotism you have trampled on human rights, nurtured unbridled corruption and squandered public money like no other President before you. Indeed, your conduct has been like a small child suddenly let loose in a toyshop. That analogy is perhaps inapt because no child could have caused so much blood to be spilled on this land as you have, or trampled on the rights of its citizens as you do. Although you are now so drunk with power that you cannot see it, you will come to regret your sons having so rich an inheritance of blood. It can only bring tragedy. As for me, it is with a clear conscience that I go to meet my Maker. I wish, when your time finally comes, you could do the same. I wish.

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"The irony in this is that, unknown to most of the public, Mahinda and I have been friends for more than a quarter century", wrote Lasantha Wickrematunge.

Lasantha Wickrematunge

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Lasantha with his parents and brother Lal.

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As for me, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I walked tall and bowed to no man. And I have not travelled this journey alone. Fellow journalists in other branches of the media walked with me: most of them are now dead, imprisoned without trial or exiled in far-off lands. Others walk in the shadow of death that your Presidency has cast on the freedoms for which you once fought so hard. You will never be allowed to forget that my death took place under your watch.

As anguished as I know you will be, I also know that you will have no choice but to protect my killers: you will see to it that the guilty one is never convicted. You have no choice. I feel sorry for you, and Shiranthi will have a long time to spend on her knees when next she goes for Confession for it is not just her owns sins which she must confess, but those of her extended family that keeps you in office.

As for the readers of The Sunday Leader, what can I say but Thank You for supporting our mission. We have espoused unpopular causes, stood up for those too feeble to stand up for themselves, locked horns with the high and mighty so swollen with power that they have forgotten their roots, exposed corruption and the waste of your hard-earned tax rupees, and made sure that whatever the propaganda of the day, you were allowed to hear a contrary view. For this I - and my family - have now paid the price that I have long known I will one day have to pay. I am - and have always been - ready for that. I have done nothing to prevent this outcome: no security, no precautions. I want my murderer to know that I am not a coward like he is, hiding behind human shields while condemning thousands of innocents to death. What am I among so many? It has long been written that my life would be taken, and by whom. All that remains to be written is when.

That The Sunday Leader will continue fighting the good fight, too, is written. For I did not fight this fight alone. Many more of us have to be - and will be - killed before The Leader is laid to rest. I hope my assassination will be seen not as a defeat of freedom but an inspiration for those who survive to step up their efforts. Indeed, I hope that it will help galvanise forces that will usher in a new era of human liberty in our beloved motherland. I also hope it will open the eyes of your President to the fact that however many are slaughtered in the name of patriotism, the human spirit will endure and flourish. Not all the Rajapakses combined can kill that.

People often ask me why I take such risks and tell me it is a matter of time before I am bumped off. Of course I know that: it is inevitable. But if we do not speak out now, there will be no one left to speak for those who cannot, whether they be ethnic minorities, the disadvantaged or the persecuted. An example that has inspired me throughout my career in journalism has been that of the German theologian, Martin Niemoller. In his youth he was an anti-Semite and an admirer of Hitler. As Nazism took hold in Germany, however, he saw Nazism for what it was: it was not just the Jews Hitler sought to extirpate, it was just about anyone with an alternate point of view. Niemoller spoke out, and for his trouble was incarcerated in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps from 1937 to 1945, and very nearly executed. While incarcerated, Niemoller wrote a poem that, from the first time I read it in my teenage years, stuck hauntingly in my mind:

First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out because
I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.

If you remember nothing else, remember this: The Leader is there for you, be you Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, low-caste, homosexual, dissident or disabled. Its staff will fight on, unbowed and unafraid, with the courage to which you have become accustomed. Do not take that commitment for granted. Let there be no doubt that whatever sacrifices we journalists make, they are not made for our own glory or enrichment: they are made for you. Whether you deserve their sacrifice is another matter. As for me, God knows I tried.

Lasantha Wickrematunge

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